

Camden Eyesores May Face Wreckers

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CAMDEN -- The state Commissioner of Community Affairs pledged to begin demolishing vacant homes that blight Camden neighborhoods after touring the city on Thursday.

Acting state DCA Commissioner Joseph V. Doria said he will work quickly to find funds to knock down abandoned houses in Whitman Park, Parkside and other neighborhoods threatened by the eyesores.

Doria, who spent nearly three hours visiting Camden neighborhoods, the downtown and the waterfront on Thursday, said he wants to collaborate with local officials for the city's betterment.

"This was the beginning of a conversation for how to work together on a cooperative basis," said Doria, a former Assembly speaker and Bayonne mayor whom Gov. Jon S. Corzine appointed DCA commissioner in October. "The governor has a major commitment to try to improve the quality of life in Camden."

Doria and deputy commissioner Charles Richmond took the tour with staff of the city's state-appointed chief operating officer, Judge Theodore Z. Davis, code-enforcement officials and Mayor Gwendolyn Faison.

In many neighborhoods, Doria said, he was surprised and alarmed to see vacant houses attached to well-tended, occupied rowhomes.

"It creates issues," Doria said. "Some homes, in terrible shape, are probably endangering the city."

The commissioner said he will make it a priority to "cobble together" \$1 million to begin demolishing dwellings within the next few months.

Doria voiced support for redevelopment initiatives downtown and along the waterfront.

He said demolishing the Sears Building on Admiral Wilson Boulevard, as proposed by Campbell Soup Co., is a priority for the DCA.

"Obviously, we're going to be trying to move on that pretty quickly," he said.

The proposal to level the Sears Building is part of Campbell's \$98 million plan to expand its world headquarters, build an office park and create a new gateway for the city.

But while the plan has support from Corzine, Faison and Davis, local activists have filed lawsuits seeking to preserve the historic Sears Building.

Calling Doria's visit "refreshing," Faison said the commissioner seemed genuinely committed to helping the city.

"For the first time as mayor, I felt like I was talking to someone who really wanted to listen," she said. "Being a mayor and a legislator too, he could say, 'We've walked in the same shoes.' "